

Masoretic Text

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Hello everyone, my name is Ryan Hutton, I use masculine pronouns, and I will be presenting on the Masoretic Text (MT) today. In this presentation I will attempt to do three things: first, give a basic overview of the Masoretic text and where it exists in relation to the other documents in the Second Temple period. Second, I will compare this text to similar texts that exist in different languages and places. Third, I will ask questions that may be relevant to an ongoing discussion of this source.

The Masoretic text, first and foremost, is a Jewish text that was compiled in Hebrew during the medieval period, sometime around 900 C.E. It is traditionally divided into three sections: Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim: Which translated are Teaching, Prophets, and Writing. Interestingly, many of the books contained in the Masoretic text appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls found in Qumran. These texts are what we call the Proto-MT, and it is what Matthew would have known of. The Dead Sea Scrolls are over a thousand years older than the first version of the Masoretic text as we know it: the Aleppo codex. This Codex includes vowel markings and Rabbinic commentary that the Dead Sea Scrolls lack. This is thought to be the most authoritative source of the Masoretic text as it is known today. The Leningrad Codex is another version of this text that was written in 1009 in Egypt. It is effectively the same, but it does include its authorship date.

Even though this is a Jewish text written in Hebrew, it has important contextual and historical information related to the development of early Christianity. The authors of the New Testament used the Tanakh and its history to justify Jesus and prove his Messianic role. This is what Matthew is doing in his Gospel. People hearing about or interested in practicing this new Christian religion would have had an understanding of the Hebrew bible and the stories contained within it. Early Christians would have been exposed to the Tanakh as an oral source, but as the centuries progressed, the Masoretic text would become the preeminent Hebrew source because of its vowel markings and commentary. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic text are useful for understanding both Judaism and

Christianity as the texts were involved in the understanding of both traditions, but importantly, they exist at different times.

Second, in comparing the Masoretic text, it should be compared to two similar texts. The Tanakh was preserved in two “families” of texts, a Hebrew-based text that would become the Masoretic Text and a Greek translation that would become the Septuagint (LXX). The first is the Tanakh which I have already talked about, and the second is the Septuagint version of the Hebrew bible. The Septuagint text is a translation of the Masoretic text from Hebrew into Greek. This Greek text was more or less scriptural for Greek-speaking Jews in Judea while the Masoretic text was the scriptural text for Palestinian Jews or those Jews who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic. Though they use different languages

Greek speaking Christians preferred the LXX version while those who spoke Hebrew continued with the MT. The MT was eventually translated to Latin for use in the Roman Catholic Church and pains were taken to be as precise as possible so as not to raise any other issues during the Protestant Reformation. The LXX is predominantly used by the Orthodox Churches in the East. There are small disagreements between these two versions of Jewish doctrine, and those differences in translation had widespread impacts on Christians in the Second Temple Period, the Middle Ages, and today.

Third, we will look into some questions presented by the texts in general and the Masoretic text in particular so that we can think about it while we’re reading. First, why is this text important from what we know about it? How do the Masoretic text and the Septuagint text differ and how are they similar? How do these texts relate to the Proto-MT of the Second Temple period? How is this text important to Judaism? Is it relevant to Christianity as well?

The Masoretic Text lets us as scholars understand medieval Jewish theology as well as effectively trace Jewish thought and practice back to the Second Temple Period. This text represents culture and history in two time periods for two different religious groups.

Bibliography

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